AFRICAN PTERODACTYLS

M. D. W. JEFFREYS, M.A., PH.D.

IN September, 1939, the *West African Review* contained an article "Living Monster or Fabulous Animal?" Readers will recollect that some years earlier there had been a type of "Challenger Expedition" into Central Africa to search the Iruwimi forests of the Belgian Congo for a huge, mysterious, antedeluvian monster. "Is the Brontosauros still alive in the morasses of the Congo?" were the headlines in some of the London papers. No report of the traces of any such monsters ever appeared, and I was not surprised. I had been right through the Belgian Congo in 1923, and had come into intimate contact with a number of what would be called Native Commissioners or District Officers in British territory, as well as with noted big-game hunters. None of these men, who were in positions to know before anyone else of the existence of such monsters, ever alluded to the possible existence of them. Yet stories do circulate among natives of animals never listed in any Museum.

On the Gambia River lingers a native tradition of an enormous monster that comes out at night from the ooze and slime of the mangrove marshes and devours whatever it meets. To those who gain the confidence of the older fishermen, terrifying stories are still told of the "Ninki Nanka", as the reptile is locally called.

Two very serious defects are immediately apparent in such stories. Animals of the size of the Brontosauros and of the Ninki Nanka are heavy, and would leave in the damp earth of the river bank or on the margin of the mangrove marshes pug marks that would persist for years. I have seen on the banks of the Rufigi River in East Africa elephant tracks two years old. Yet the tracks of any such monsters have never been reported, either by the natives or by any European hunter.

The second defect in the probability of the existence of such creatures is that these huge animals are usually herbivorous and would inevitably invade cultivated riverine lands. Yet no reports of ravaged farms are ever received from natives. On circumstantial evidence one may rule out the existence on land of any huge monster, leaving the "Sea-serpent" to its watery domain.

The creatures of the air are in a different category, they fly and do not necessarily leave traces behind them. It is unlikely that any direct descendants of Pteranodon—the great eighteen-footers of the British and Kansa chalk deposits—are alive to-day, but of Rhamphorynchus, with a wing-spread of twenty-five inches, things may be different. Mr. Melland, a Native Commissioner in Northern Rhodesia, recorded a conversation he had with some local natives:—

" 'What is the "Kongamato"?'

" ' A bird.'

" 'What kind of bird?'

" 'Oh! well it isn't a bird really; it is more like a lizard with membranous wings like a bat.'

"Further inquiries disclosed the facts that the wing-spread was from four to seven feet across, that the general colour was red. It was believed to have no feathers but only skin on its body, and was believed to have teeth on its back.

"I sent for two books, containing pictures of pterodactyls, and every native present immediately and unhesitatingly picked out and identified it as a 'Kongamato'. The natives assert that this flying reptile still exists."[1]

From the Gold Coast comes a similar story. The "Susabonsam" is a mysterious flying creature, described by the natives as being about the size of a man, with thin tenebrous wings, like a bat. These two accounts favour Pteranodon rather than Rhamphorynchus. However, the obvious answer is that the natives have exaggerated the description of a very large bat.

The trouble with this explanation is that the natives have names for each kind of bat and neither of the above described creatures is regarded as a bat. Also, there are no known bats in Africa comparable in size with, say, the flying-foxes of Java with wing-spreads of five feet, with and to which such creatures might be confused or traceable. The largest bats of Africa are the fruit-bats and their wing-span seldom exceeds three feet. Nevertheless let us see how the bats fare under native reports.

Among the Ibibio bats are associated with witchcraft, and for any bat to fly into a house and touch a person is a sure sign that that person is thereafter bewitched and will perish by having his heart eaten at night while he sleeps, or his shadow captured and taken away.

Among the pagans of the Nilotic Sudan, "Witchcraft is usually performed at night, and thus owls and bats are associated with it."[2]

Among the Bongo of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan much the same superstition lurks—"Spirits, devils and witches have their general appellation of 'Bitaboh', wood-goblins being specially called 'Ronga'. Comprehended under the same term are all the bats (especially the *Megaderma frons*, which flutters about from tree to tree in broad daylight)."[3]

In the Cameroons the superstition of the vampire is attached to bats. "Bats, owls, and bush-cats are said to be witch shapes (among the people of Ndop); should a bat or owl come near a man's house or a bush-cat defæcate in his compound, the man must go at once to the diviner and discover what remedies he must take to ward off the evil. A witch-shape is said to be capable of sucking out the life of a sleeping man or woman."[4]

From Sierra Leone comes an account of the gruesome habits of the large fruit bat. "One of the most uncanny superstitions is that of the 'Boman' in which Anthropologists will recognise the vampire of European superstition. This creature is said to suck the blood of sleeping children until they die: it can turn into a stone or snake at will. The 'Boman' is in reality the

[1]Melland, A. H. *In Witchbound Africa.*
[2]Seligman, C. G. and B. Z. *The Pagan Tribes of the Nilotic Sudan*, p. 523. London, 1932.
[3]Schweinfurth, G. *The Heart of Africa*, Vol. I, p. 144. London, 1878.
[4]Drummond-Hay, J. C. Unpublished Govt. MSS. Ndop Assessment Report, 1925.

hammer-headed bat (*Hypsignathus monstrosus*), the largest fruit bat found in Africa; its dull and monotonous cry at the time when fruit is ripening has struck terror into many a village, whose inhabitants will sally forth from their houses and beat tins to drive it away, cursing its father and mother and all its ancestors the while."[1]

It is curious that in two such widely separated areas as Sierra Leone and the Cameroons blood-sucking should be attributed to bats when no such type of bats are found in Africa. The only place where such bats exist is in South America, and not further north than southern Mexico.[2] These bats are quite small, and were of course not known to Europeans until long after the discovery of the Americas. They were called vampire-bats after the belief in Europe of this mysterious being, a vampire. It however was not bat-like and could not be associated with flying monsters. At one time in Europe the vampire was regarded as a blood-sucking ghost, at another as a witch, at another as a corpse that destroyed the living by sucking their blood from them.

The idea of a vampire in the form of a huge bat-like figure was the foundation of the gruesome story of *Dracula*.

To return to mysterious flying creatures that haunt the stories of the natives there is among the Hausa the "Buraka". It was winged and had the head of a man with the legs and feet of a horse.[3] As this story is found among the Hausa it may be an Arab version of the Grecian Centaur.

Nevertheless, in these accounts of mysterious flying creatures, is one dealing with fact or fancy? Is it a case of race-memory, a carry-over from the times when the human race hid from the terror that flew by day, or is it another instance of culture-contacts?

Perhaps some such racial consciousness would explain the occurrence of stories of winged creatures in so many places. The dragon is another form of the beast. Are St. George and the Dragon, Andromeda and the Dragon and the Dragon of Wales but local tribal variants of the "Kongomato" and of the "Susabonsam"?

Or is one dealing with a case of rationalising a culture-contact superstition common to both Africa and Europe by projecting a belief in witchcraft, vampires, ghosts on to the harmless, little "fly-by-nights" and then exaggerating their size? Perhaps.

Others who read may be able to add to these stories, and I would welcome accounts of mysterious winged creatures in Africa. Yet *ex Africa aliquid semper novi*, and the suspicion lingers that perhaps in some hidden corner of Africa a few, shy pterodactyls still lurk.

Yes, there are still hidden corners in Africa. Only a few months ago I was the first Britisher to peer over the rim, at 6,000 feet, of a lovely little crater lake, scramble down its precipitous walls, and drink from its pure, pellucid waters.

[1]Goddard, T. N. *The Handbook of Sierra Leone*, p. 56. London, 1925.
[2]*Encyclopædia Brit.*, 14th Ed., Vol. 5, p. 600.
[3]Bargery, G. P. *A Hausa-English Dictionary*. Oxford, 1934.